

**Rabbi Sidney David Shanken:  
Courage and Caring in War and Peace**  
*By Vic Bary*

Whether as a bombardier/navigator in WW II, or as a crusading civil rights advocate in the 1960s, Cranford's Rabbi Sidney Shanken brought courage and caring to whatever he did.

Early Years

Sidney David Shanken was born May 1, 1922 in St. Louis, Missouri, the second of three children born to Herman and Esther Shanken. His father, a naturalized US citizen born in Latvia, was a wholesale salesman for a dress manufacturer. Sidney grew up in San Antonio, Texas where he boxed as a heavyweight at Jefferson High School. He would later say it was the discrimination against Mexicans he witnessed growing up in San Antonio that would make him such an outspoken advocate for civil rights.

Sidney was in his freshman year at the University of Texas in Austin, when Pearl Harbor was bombed December 7, 1941. The following March 16, he enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps. He would train to become a bombardier/navigator. In 1943 he married Sylvia Franklin of Laredo at San Angelo Army Air Field.



Upon completing his training, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Sidney Shanken was assigned to Sicily and then to Italy where he served with the 340<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force as a navigator/bombardier on B-25 Mitchell twin engine bombers. Named in honor of General "Billy" Mitchell, the B-25 was a medium bomber with a crew of five which served in every theater of WW II.



**B-25 Mitchell**

Nearly 10,000 B-25s were manufactured during WW II.

Wartime bomber service in the U.S. Army Air Force (as it was later known) was considered so dangerous, that aircrews were limited to 25 missions unless they volunteered for more. At the end of his first 25 missions, Lieutenant Shanken volunteered for 25 more. At the end of his 50<sup>th</sup> mission, he volunteered for another 25. While flying his 54<sup>th</sup> mission, Shanken was severely wounded in the leg by anti-aircraft fire. Upon his physical recovery four months later, his flight surgeon deemed him unsuitable for continued flying without an extended period of rest and recuperation. The surgeon cited “combat neurosis” manifested by symptoms such as tenseness, marked apprehension, moody episodes and wild disturbing dreams. (Today we would say he was suffering from PTSD.)

1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Shanken was rotated to the continental US. During a 2018 interview with CranfordRadio, Sidney told of a flight he was navigating across the Atlantic back to North America. His airplane was caught in a hurricane, with little fuel left and the view below them obscured by the clouds. The pilot had just informed the crew that they would probably have to ditch the plane in the ocean when a break in the clouds appeared below. They managed to find an airfield (in Brazil) and approached it to land. As they began taxiing down the runway, the engines quit, the last of the fuel consumed. Sidney reports that he heard himself singing an old Jewish song, “My Yiddisha Momma.”

Sidney was still not finished with serving his country in war, and volunteered to navigate in B-29 heavy bombers. He was on his way through California for assignment in the Pacific theater when the atom bombs were dropped and Japan surrendered.

Deeply affected by what he had seen in the war, Sidney Shanken decided to become a force for peace. He completed studies at NYU, then studied at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. He was ordained as a rabbi in 1949. He served as a rabbi in Bridgeton, NJ, and Pittston, PA and Dobbs Ferry, NY before coming to Cranford in August, 1957.

### The Cranford Years

Rabbi Shanken was brought here to serve the expanding Temple Beth-El. (Ground would be broken in June, 1959 for the current Temple building on Walnut Avenue.) In 1958, Rabbi Shanken was appointed a member of the Cranford Clergy Council.

Rabbi Shanken soon established himself at Temple Beth-El, and in the greater Cranford community, as devoted to peace, as a strong opponent of discrimination, and as an advocate for voting rights and Israel's right to self-determination. In 1961, he became a Freedom Rider through CORE, the Congress on Racial Equality. A number of times he joined the mixed-race group traveling through Tennessee and Virginia to determine whether interstate bus terminal facilities were following an Interstate Commerce Commission regulation to desegregate. Enduring threats on their lives and hateful stares from local residents, the Freedom Riders found that the local bus terminals were complying with the federally mandated desegregation program.

Upon his return, Rabbi Shanken was summoned to a meeting of Temple Beth-El's trustees. When asked who he was representing on his recent freedom ride, his reply was "Judaism". The matter was dropped and he was applauded for his efforts.

Rabbi Shanken met the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. several times. He was with King in the thwarted march from Selma to Montgomery. He recalls speaking at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and autographing the books of several young girls. Three weeks later the church was bombed and the young girls killed. In spite of this and his wartime experiences, Sidney Shanken was a firm believer in Reverend King's principles of non-violent protest.

Rabbi Shanken's prominence in Cranford is attested to by the fact that a search of the Cranford Public Library digital archives for his name produces 53 pages (of 10 citations each) of results. He and his first wife, Sylvia, had two children – William (called "Zev"), and Levia, and travelled frequently to Israel where he had both an apartment and a car. A 1978 *Cranford Citizen and Chronicle* article citing his 22 years of service to Temple Beth-El said he already made 18 trips to Israel to lead pilgrimages and to teach and assist teenagers in depressed areas of Israel.

Sidney Shanken was not afraid of making his views known in public. He was part of a 1968 Clergyman's panel on the morality of the Vietnam War. He told the audience that his son had recently been reclassified 1-A in the draft, and stated "I am afraid my son may be killed in the war, but I am even more afraid that he may kill for an immoral purpose."

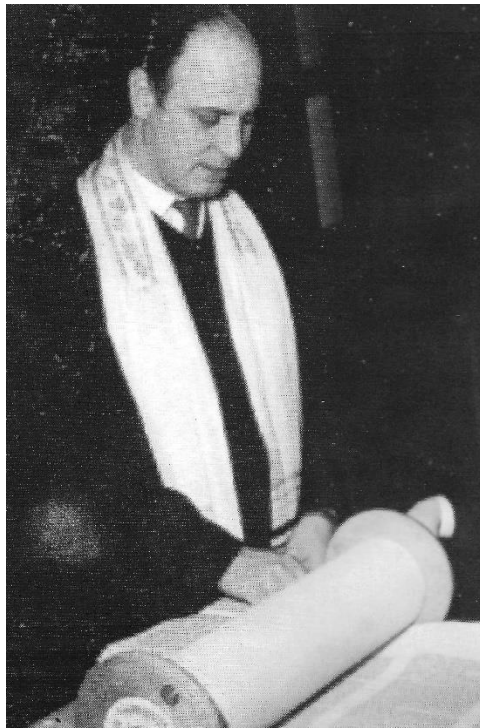
In 1973 he addressed the Board of Education on the decision not to allow the high school salutatorian, Randy Turkel, and the valedictorian, Jonathan Reichman – both Jews – to address the graduation exercises. The stated reason was concern that they might address sensitive issues.

While he said he would rather attribute the decision to poor judgement rather than antisemitism, Shanken noted "I am the senior clergyman in Cranford, yet I have never been invited to give the blessing at graduation." A bit of the heavyweight boxer remained below the surface.

Sidney and Sylvia would divorce shortly before he ended his tenure at Temple Beth-El and he moved to Israel in mid-1979. He said in his 2018 CranfordRadio interview that he had nothing but the fondest memories of Cranford as a welcoming and caring community.

## Post-Cranford Years

After leaving Cranford, Sidney Shanken resided in Washington Crossing and Pottstown, PA and in Lakewood, New Jersey. He would remarry and he and his wife, Gloria, would live the retired life in Boynton Beach, FL while continuing to visit and to volunteer in Israel. He died September 16, 2020 after a battle with cancer. Rabbi Sidney Shanken had lived 98 courageous, caring years.



*(A special note of thanks is due Zev Shanken for his review of this article and addition of information to it.)*

### Sources:

1. *Ancestry.com*
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5. *Flight Surgeon Report to Commanding Officer 488<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group Re: 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Sidney Shanken’s fitness to return to combat duty.*
6. *Shanken, Zev, The Shell Fragment Was Never Removed: A Book of Poems for and about my Father, manuscript awaiting publication, 2022.*
7. *US Census, various. US WWII Enlistment Record.*
8. *US WWII Enlistment Record.*